

## **Karl W. Kenyon**

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Interviewed by Jim King  
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Jim: I'm visiting with Karl Kenyon and talking about the old days of the Fish and Wildlife Service. Karl, I know that you had a pretty strenuous time in World War II. You flew fighter planes all over the Pacific.

Karl: The F6F, Grumman Hellcat.

Jim: You flew off carriers?

Karl: Mainly off the *Sangamon*, (??) an escort carrier.

Jim: How many planes could that carry?

Karl: I think there were 15 fighter planes in our squadron. We supported landings. We saw the Japs firing at the incoming boatloads of soldiers that were landing on the beaches and we shot at the people who were shooting at them. We could see where the bullets were coming from because they mostly had tracers.

Jim: That was a pretty wild way to make a living, sounds like to me.

Karl: It wasn't a way to make a living, it was a way to risk dying.

Jim: They keep talking about the safety of flying and all the care and you were thinking about entirely different things, I'm sure, when you were doing that sort of thing.

Karl: We were thinking of surviving and killing the Japs.

Jim: You did, then you came back and you got a job with the Fish and Wildlife Service. Had you worked for Fish and Wildlife before the War?

Karl: No. The first thing that I did when I got out of the Service was to be a teacher at Mills College in Oakland, California. I did more studying at the University of California but then I had a chance to get a job in the Fish and Wildlife Service, so I took that. In 1947, I went to duty on the Pribilof Islands. My office was in Seattle and I worked under Victor B. Sheffer, who was my boss. I went to do a study on the population of the northern fur seal. The first thing we did was to count pups. We tried to count all the pups that were on St. Paul Island.

Jim: There weren't very good figures for how big that seal herd was?

Karl: No. It was just to get the number of pups that were born in that season and we counted the number of bulls but we didn't try to count the females because they were going in and out, on and off shore.

Jim: How was it living in the Pribilof's then? We still hear this business about the Fish and Wildlife Service holding the Aleuts on the Pribilof's in slavery so they could skin seals for the government. That keeps coming up.

Karl: I never heard of that because they weren't held in slavery. They were paid to do the job. As far as I know they were paid and they seemed to be happy people.

Jim: I think they were paid as government employees and they retired as government employees.

Karl: I don't know about their retirement but I do know they were working as employees to slaughter seals. Under organized plans they did all the skinning and caring for the skins before they were taken by Harry May, who was the skin company, that I don't remember right off hand, after all these years.

Jim: Was that the Falk Fur Company or something in St. Louis?

Karl: I guess it may have been but I haven't thought of it in so many years.

Jim: Did you get acquainted with some of the Native people when you were working there? Did some of them work with you?

Karl: Oh yes, and later on some of them worked with me down in the Aleutian Islands when I worked on sea otters down there. The one that worked with me the most on the Pribilofs was Stepeton,(??) that was his last name. I can't remember his first name. He was a nice young guy in his teens and he helped me with all kinds of things, collecting data during the kill and afterwards and at different times.

Jim: So you would spend the whole summer there on the Island?

Karl: Yes.

Jim: How about Clarence Olson? Was he a good leader of the operation up there?

Karl: Clarence Olson was a very nice guy, yes. He and his wife, Marjorie Olson, both very nice people. He was a good leader for the people on the Pribilofs. He was in charge of the Island. He had been there awhile.

Jim: Then you got that done then you got assigned to find out what was what with the sea otters.

Karl: Yes, I began working on sea otters after I did two-three years, it is so far back now, that I don't remember the details. I don't think of them anymore so I don't remember all the details. Anyway, I went to the Aleutians, did aerial surveys with Theron Smith, our pilot. We did aerial surveys of sea otters in the Aleutians. I worked on Amchitka. I was the first one to keep sea otters alive in captivity. The first one was a female that we kept in the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle.

Jim: Oh, I remember that. There was a lot of newspaper coverage of that. It was pretty exciting because sea otters were thought to be extremely rare.

Karl: Well I don't know if they were thought to be extremely rare but anytime that people tried to take them into captivity, they didn't know that they had to keep their fur absolutely clean because they don't have a blubber layer like fur seals do. If their fur got dirty, and water got to their skin, they would die. They would die of cold. I learned how to keep sea otters clean in captivity and now I have forgotten the name of the one we had in Seattle at the zoo. She lasted several years. That was how I got them started on keeping sea otters alive in captivity and now they are common in captivity in places where they take proper care of them. They should be kept in salt water because they are adjusted to salt water and they actually drink it. I don't know the details on why they survive so well in salt water.

Jim: Did you get an advance degree with birds at Cornell?

Karl: Yes at Cornell I got my master's degree on the Baltimore Oriole. Baltimore Oriole's usually are attracted to a nest that is already hanging in a tree and they build their new nest next to it. That's what I got my master's degree on and that was before I went

into the military in WWII. They wouldn't let me stay out long enough to finish and get my Ph.D. I did finish my master's degree under Dr. Arthur A. Allen, but never got my Ph.D. He was a nice person.

Jim: So then, while you were doing fur seals and sea otters, you had to keep track of the birds that were around some too?

Karl: Yes, I kept track of them to some degree but I didn't do any real studies of the birds. I did a few papers on the birds but now I have forgotten which ones I did. Now that I have just had my 81<sup>st</sup> birthday on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February; my 81<sup>st</sup> birthday.

Jim: I remember talking to you about Song Sparrows in the Aleutians. Did you collect some?

Karl: I collected a few birds but they are all back in the U.S. National Museum so I don't remember what I collected really.

Jim: Several years ago with the PSG gave you an award. I think it was three species that are named after you now?

Karl: I don't know about three. The only thing that I remember that is named after me is the *Inhydro-Lutrius-Kenyoni*(??) – one of the races of sea otters. I don't remember any birds that were named after me.

Jim: I'll have to ask George Divoky. He'll remind you. He knows.

Karl: But I do remember because the *Inhydro-Lutrius-Kenyoni* was only given that name a year or two ago when someone who works on the classification of sea otters told me about it.

Jim: That is the Aleutian sub-species or something? That would be distinct from the Prince William Sound bunch would it?

Karl: I don't know because the *Inhydra-Lutrius* is the one in California, isn't it? I haven't studied any of this stuff recently and my memory is not too good and we've had three beers tonight so my memory isn't too good.

Jim: Were you out there some when Cal Lensink was doing his otter work?

Karl: Yes, I was out there when he was there.

Jim: He is still in Anchorage and is retired.

Karl: I didn't know he had retired. I know that Robert D. Jones, Jr., just passed on. I think he died of cancer. Robert D. Jones, Jr. was in charge of the Aleutian Islands area wildlife refuge.

Jim: He ran a colorful show out there.

Karl: Yes he did and he let everybody know that he was running it. No mistake about that.

Jim: I was going to ask you about Clarence Rhode. There's not many people around anymore that remember him and had dealings with him and he was such a dynamic person.

Karl: He was. He thought that he could do anything but he found out finally that he couldn't. That was quite a shock to know that he had disappeared in northern Alaska.

Jim: Well the details can't be determined. I think it was 22 years before they found the airplane and there was a big search. At the time they were searching for Clarence, I think the military search people said it was the biggest search they had had since Eddie Rickenbacker was missing in the Pacific during WWII.

Karl: I was really sorry to hear that Clarence Rhode had disappeared in a flight in northern Alaska. He was a very daring person. He did things that other people wouldn't dare to do. I heard that one time he flew out to the Pribilof Islands when he was told before he left that the conditions were bad and he might not be able to land but he went out and he landed and that was it.

Jim: Well, that was sort of the name of the game. I think in those days, the weather reports you could get were not good and it was just natural to take a look. That was the only thing you could do and if it didn't look good, you would turn around and go back. I know he flew that way a lot. He had flown through WWII, out of Fairbanks for a little airline, and then he flew Alaska Coastal Airline in Southeast. I remember he used to take his vacation and fly Grumman's for Alaska Coastal. He was a pretty experienced pilot.

Karl: Yes he was. He was experienced.

Jim: Ray Woolford was still living when that accident report came out and he looked at the description of the finding of the plane and they found a pistol belt in the left seat and Woolford said right away that Clarence wasn't in the left seat. He never wore a pistol and that Stan Fredrickson, the agent that was with him used to wear a pistol. Woolford thought maybe something happened and Fredrickson was trying to fly that Grumman. The belt could have gotten in there some other way but what that story does, is open up the question of maybe Clarence was sick or something and Fredrickson was trying to get him out of there. They had apparently been camped. Rhodes was a pretty good team-builder and I think he wanted to get some of you guys up from Seattle that were dragging your feet.

Karl: Well, you knew more about that than I did. I don't remember that.

Jim: You don't remember him trying to get you to come to Juneau?

Karl: No.

Jim: Well, maybe I'm not right about that. He was a wonderful team-builder and the repercussions of his team-building continued. Well, let's see. You got the fur seals taken care of and the sea otters taken care of and then the next trouble shooting you did was for the poor old albatross' in the Pacific.

Karl: I went to Midway to see if we could figure out a way to keep the albatross' from bothering flights and it was not an easy job. Flying in the daytime is the time that the albatross' are also flying and you are liable to have trouble with them. Landings and takeoffs at night are much safer for avoiding contact with the albatross'. Mainly, I was there to study the life history and the biology of the Laysan(??) and the other birds of Midway Island.

Jim: Wasn't there something about them soaring on the sand dunes and you got the sand dunes leveled or something along that line?

Karl: That was one of the problems, yes. The sand dunes along the sides of the runway were causing the albatross' to come in and fly across the runway. They soar up over the sand dunes and then soar out over the runway. By removing the sand dunes from the side of the runway, it stopped the albatross' from soaring over the runways when the planes wanted to use them. That was a very definite thing.

Jim: So that really solved the problem and saved the U.S. Military from having too many problems?



Karl: To a large extent, yes. Those are all old memories now. That was a long time ago. We did get good information on albatross' as to how much they migrated and how many survived in various situations.

Jim: Was it you that stuck some albatross' on Navy planes and took them off nests and had them released in different parts of the Pacific?

Karl: We did do that and they came back in remarkably fast time. We got information on how fast they came back. It was surprising how fast they did make it when they went the long way. That is published in a paper and I don't remember the details.

Jim: I remember people talking about it at the time. It was a pretty startling story about these birds crossing half the Pacific in just a few days. They came back to their nests.

Jim: What are some of your favorite stories during your time with the Fish and Wildlife Service? Do you have a favorite?

Karl: I don't think of any right off hand.

Jim: I remember the one sea otter survey I did with you. Theron Smith and Dave Spencer were flying a DC-3 and you had to sit on a barstool in the middle.

Karl: Well I remember that. We did our survey but we did have better adaptive planes later on to doing the surveys.

Jim: I remember you teasing Smitty about all the money the trip was costing and you only had a barstool to sit on.

Karl: Well you remember that better than I do.

Jim: I think that had a lot to do with “supering up” a Grumman goose. The Grumman goose was real good when they got the turbine engines and the big tanks and extra seats in. Then you had a seat right behind the pilot.

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